

Rooney, J. (2000, September). Survival skills for the new principal. Educational Leadership, 58 (1), 77-78.

## Survival Skills for the New Principal

By Joanne Rooney

### **New school leaders need to identify and avoid some common pitfalls.**

Each year, the work of school principals grows in complexity, and demands multiply. The job exhausts experienced principals. Beginning principals feel overwhelmed. First-year principals have been known to stare at their paychecks and exclaim, "is it really worth it?!"

All school administrators are immersed in their own work and often have little time to introduce a new principal to the culture of the schools and districts and to job expectations.

Anne Weaver Hart (1993), Provost and Dean of Faculty at Claremont Graduate University, suggests that new principal induction often consists of "the practice of sink-or-swim socialization," such as being handed a building map and a key to the office door (p. 18)<sup>1</sup>. Some new principals may hear a subtle yet distinct message: Just don't make waves.

To make the job less turbulent, we need to address first-year principals' transition and succession needs. Innocent actions can assume incredible significance, and recovering from such mistakes can set new principals reeling. Although principals' accounts of their initial blunders can later be related humorously, the events are distressing as they happen.

One zealous department chair, using money from her meager budget, surprised teachers by replacing the spring-sprung couch in the faculty room. Another enthusiastic principal replaced an old, odor-ridden refrigerator. Her motive was simple hygiene. A third principal swapped the Pepsi machine with a Coke machine to afford more beverages choices. Another removed aging and dusty school photographs that hung near a student display case. One principal (whose tenure was short-lived) dismissed the school secretary.

Teachers' responses to these actions were astoundingly similar, "It was good enough for [the former principal]. I guess she'll change everything now." "I remember the very day in May when we got that couch." "Just because SHE likes Coke!" "Those pictures have been there since MY kids went to this school!"

Similar stories abound. Every new principal can tell his or her own tale. In each instance, after the perceived affront occurs, winning the staff's trust becomes a more arduous task.

### **The Principals' Facts of Life**

My work with induction and mentoring programs leads me into regular contact with first year principals. I've noted several hurdles that new principals consistently face. *The ghosts of the past still rule the school.* Although invisible, the image of the last principal haunts the current leader. Even though school faculty and staff noted the principal's frailties while she ran the school, they endow her with saintly virtues once she leaves. The new leader must acknowledge and respect the ghosts of his or her predecessors.

*The culture of the school is deeply embedded in the practices and expectations of each staff member..* Teachers who say "we've always done it that way" are not necessarily afraid of change. Longstanding leadership offers consistency that gives meaning and security to teachers' professional lives. Insignificant material icons, such as a sofa, act as symbols. Ceremonies

ritualize and celebrate that meaning. Treading on a custom threatens the meaning that people seek in their lives. New principals need to team and respect their school's culture.

*Once you walk across the principals threshold, all relationships change.* The new principal may look the same, hold identical beliefs, and express him or herself as clearly as when he or she was a teacher. Teachers, parents, and children, however, perceive the principal as the ultimate seat of wisdom and authority in the school. Even leaders who are promoted from within a school find their former colleagues hushing the conversation when their new "boss" walks into the lunchroom.

*The principalship is a very lonely world.* Although surrounded by people all day, the principal is only one person. The new principal soon learns that the buck stops with him or her. When the buses are late, the lunches cold, or the playground muddy, others hold the principal personally responsible.

*The principal rarely wins a popularity contest.* Decisions that principals have to make almost always displease someone. Parents are often concerned about the welfare of only their child. Teachers may not realize that the broken air conditioner in their homeroom is not the biggest issue facing the principal.

*The work never gets done.* New principals may work late into the evening and on the weekend to finish paperwork. By Monday afternoon, the paperwork piles up again. All school leaders experience this phenomenon, but new principals may feel overwhelmed.

### **Some Practical Tips**

Take heart-most principals survive the first year. Veteran principals become accustomed to the workload and the loneliness, and they slowly become part of the culture even as they influence it. Principals learn that change comes slowly through strong relationships built with staff, parents, and students. As a result, remarkable leaders can develop in today's schools.

New principals might avoid some common pitfalls by reflecting on the following ideas.

*Respect the past with its heroes, heroines, icons, and rituals.* The school secretary is often the custodian of the culture and the heartbeat of its informal communication system. If you want to know about the school culture or history, ask the secretary. Hope that he or she likes and trusts you. Treat the secretary as a professional. You might occasionally bring flowers for his or her desk.

*Meet each teacher and department chair.* New leaders should consistently ask their staff and faculty two questions:

What about the school do you truly value and want to retain at all costs? What in the school needs to be discarded? These questions, phrased effectively, will elicit some valuable advice. Ask these questions on the teachers' turf-in their classrooms, not in the principal's office. Always remember that the image of you sitting behind the principal's desk conveys an image of power that needs to be used carefully.

*Locate the power.* Bring those with power-teachers, parents, and individuals who applied for your job and failed-into the loop of your influence. Seek their advice. Assign them leadership roles. It's better to keep powerful people on your team rather than have them plot your downfall.

Work on discovering your professional values, and hold them dear.

*Keep the central office informed.* The superintendent and central office personnel can be your allies or your critics. Keep them informed of your first-year adventures and solicit their advice. However, for help with daffy concerns, call a trusted colleague.

*Find friends and mentors among your colleagues.* Explore the district culture. Find another principal to lead you through the minefields of your first year. Appointed mentors may or may not fill this role. Friends, however, will.

*When in doubt, keep still.* Listen with both ears and eyes wide open. The first year is one of personal learning. Sometimes opinions are best left unspoken until the leader has gained credibility.

*Take care of yourself physically, emotionally, professionally, and spiritually.* Enter a time in your planner for exercise or other activities you enjoy. Keep this time as sacred as any appointment or meeting. "No, I am busy then" covers your aerobics class as well as a scheduled staff meeting. Spend time reflecting on your leadership. You lead from within your own person, so nurture that person.

*Continue to learn by reading, attending professional meetings, and conversing with professional fiends.* No principal ever consults a college textbook for an answer to a problem. A call to a friend or a quick lunch with a colleague may assure you that you are not alone.

*Pick your battles.* Not every issue needs to be addressed. The important ones come back a second and third time. Clearly define, in your own mind, what you stand for. What are the nonnegotiable of your administration? Fight for those. Hopefully they focus on students' needs and learning. The other stuff-the Coke or Pepsi issues-is simply not important. To know the difference is hard, especially that first year. Work on discovering your professional values, and hold them dear.

More than ever before, schools need principals and other leaders who are dedicated to working for children. Political and media agendas besiege schools. Business models with simple raise-the test-score solutions to complex problems prosper. Parents may be demanding or absent. Teachers who directly touch the lives of students are weary of criticism and often question their career choice.

Schools need principals who understand that schools are human endeavors. Despite the demands of the principal ship and the challenges of the first year, an effective leader has the power to help teachers and students learn and grow in profound ways.

A final word of advice: New principals need to become their own cheerleaders, repeating to themselves, "You can do it!" The rest of us will hope that all new leaders find within themselves courage, strength, and wisdom, in that order.

Hart, Ann Weaver. (1993). *Principal Succession: Establishing leadership in schools*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.